

The Migrants, Me and You

The artistic interpretation of
being placed and being displaced

by

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Abstract

The Migrants, Me and You is a creative practice-based study which explores the states of being placed and being displaced in the context of human migration and how these can be visually represented. It provides new insights into the roles that identity and displacement play in the creative process (as artists, how we are placed/displaced); whether artwork created from personal experience can become representative of the stories of others (how they are placed/displaced); and how viewers are placed or displaced by artwork which tackles difficult issues like migration.

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*...exile does not mean just crossing borders; it grows and matures inside the exiled,
transforms them and becomes their destiny.*

Milosz cited in Bauman (2005, p. 137)



Figure 1 Massimo Sestini (2014) Migrant Boat in the Mediterranean [Photograph]

Preface

A visitor to my exhibition (gesturing to my artwork): Where are you in this?

Whether this question was ‘Where am I placed as an artist in my work?’ or ‘Where am I placed with regards to my subject matter?’ it became a framing question in the critical analysis of my practice research.

This question is reflected in the haunting audio from Rosi’s *Fire at Sea* (2016) documentary film on migrant journeys.

Coast Guard: Your position, please? Your position?

Woman: Please, we beg you, please help us!

Coast Guard: How many people?

Woman: 150 persons. We have small children. Please can you help us? We are sinking!

‘Your position please?’ becomes the challenge to viewers of the film, to us all (Rosi, 2017).

What is my position with regards to current migrant events and my own migration? How am I placed/displaced by events – as an observer, as an artist, as a migrant, as a human?

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1. Introduction

The Migrants, Me and You study was an MA by Research (Fine Art) which explored the artistic interpretation of the states of being placed and being displaced in the context of human migration.

The research followed three strands of investigation under the constituent parts of the title interpreted as: *The Migrants* (visual representation of current migrant events); *Me* (visual depiction of my migration from apartheid South Africa in 1985); and *You* (consideration of how the viewer is placed/displaced by the artwork and by current events).

The research drew on observations of media representation and popular discourse on current events, and consideration of writing on cultural identity, diaspora, migration and exile. Wider research explored artistic context to establish how I am placed as an artist and how my work is placed within contemporary creative practice. This was combined with critical analysis of the work of contemporary artists who are migrants or exiles; or artists working with themes of migration and displacement; or those with a connection to Africa, especially South Africa.

The research comprised a studio component with creation of new artworks and a written component as this text. The two components work together to address the research questions.

The outputs included painted images, three-dimensional works, found objects, film, and poetry. The study culminated in a public exhibition of selected artefacts which brought together the *Migrant* and *Me* creative strands in a single space where the responses of the viewer, the *You*, could be observed.

The research is evidenced through the artefacts; through this text, and by supporting documentation in the form of film footage of the exhibition with commentary, and a photographic record of the creative process and artworks (exhibited and non-exhibited).

The study is best evaluated by viewing the different elements in order as follows:

1. *The Migrants, Me and You - Film of the Exhibition* (2019)
2. *Time Lapse - film artwork shown at the exhibition* (2018)
3. *The Migrants, Me and You - Research Journey* (Porter, 2019)
4. *The Migrants, Me and You - this Thesis*

Background

Artists almost inevitably make art for two purposes: for psychological reasons to get a sense of who they are (intrinsic), and for social purposes to communicate what feels important to others (extrinsic) (Anderson, 2004).

The point of departure for my research was an aerial photograph of a migrant boat with many passengers on board (Fig. 1). I was drawn to the aesthetic of the photograph and created a painting in response, on a roll of till receipt paper which I had to hand.

I found it difficult reconciling the aesthetic with the human tragedy depicted in the image and I determined to interrogate my position through my practice, and to seek an understanding of public perception and discourse with regards to the subject matter.

This intrinsic need to explore the subject further was the start of my research into how migration and displacement are visually represented. Further paintings followed, using similar images from the internet brought up using the search term ‘Mediterranean Migrants’ on my mobile phone. The artwork depicting migrant journeys became the *Migrant* strand of my research.

As work on this strand progressed, it became apparent this creative enquiry into the stories of others could not be done without revisiting my own migration from South Africa.

As Chambers (1994, p. 115) suggests, migration and movement bring us up against the ‘limits of our inheritance’. We can choose to stay in a familiar world or can choose to embrace the new post-migration world. To bring my unique voice to this research, I needed to unpack my migrational experience and to undertake a creative journey into how I am placed/displaced. I chose to ‘disturb and interrupt’ my sense of place. This became the *Me* strand of my research.

While considering the creative avenues of investigation, I found myself reflecting on the role of bystander or onlooker (of current events), and viewer (of my artwork). I sought to understand how, as humans, we can turn a blind eye to suffering of others and how we distance ourselves from events. The extrinsic motivation to find a means to communicate through my artwork and in a way that elicited a response from the viewer, formed the third part in my research, the *You* strand.

John Berger (1982, p. 286) suggests the power of the story is more than a ‘meeting-place for the protagonists, the listener and the teller’. It is a process that merges the three. My research culminated in the bringing together of the creative strands (*Migrant* and *Me*) and the viewer (*You*) in the same space to allow for the interplay and contradictions between them, and for a merging of the three.

The research strands became defined as:

- *The Migrants* - visual representation of current migrant events, and of how the ‘other’ is placed/displaced (in popular perception, media reporting, current discourse and in contemporary artwork)

- *Me* - visual depiction of my personal experience of migration, how I am placed/displaced as artist, migrant, observer
- *You* – consideration of how the viewer is placed/displaced by the exhibition of the artefacts from the first two strands, and by events

In defiance of these definitions, there was inevitable blurring of boundaries between the three which afforded unexpected insights into my understanding of how we place ourselves and how we are placed or viewed by others. There were times when ‘you’ as viewer, became ‘you’ as me in my role as observer of the ‘other’ (migrants, refugees); or ‘you’ meaning the person who is not me, but who is looking at or judging me in my roles as artist, migrant, white South African. At other times ‘you’ represented me, when, through self-reflection, I attempted to objectively assess my role as artist or migrant, or to critically analyse my artwork, thoughts and responses. It was important to acknowledge the fluidity of these labels and to embrace the complications of aligning myself with them, including those that were uncomfortable e.g. the ‘you’ in my role as artist aestheticising the suffering of others.

My practice research addressed the following questions:

1. What is it to be placed/displaced as a migrant, as an artist and as a viewer?
2. How can the states of being placed and being displaced be visually represented and in a way that places/displaces the observer?
3. Within my creative practice, is it possible to bridge the gap between my own experience of migration and that of migrants caught up in current events?
4. Is it possible to tell someone else’s story through art and what consideration should be given to the ethics of aestheticisation of suffering?

2. Methodology

According to Sullivan (2009, p. 41), art practice in itself is transformative and dynamic and the process of creative and critical thought is reflexive with the artist intuitively taking on the roles of researcher and the researched. Smith and Dean (2009, p. 5) state that creative practice can have measurable research outputs and that a practitioner's skills, knowledge and creative processes can result in unique insights which constitutes research.

As artist practitioner, participant and researcher, my artistic outcomes have an intrinsic value as new knowledge. The methodology which emerged from my practice and processes, presented as reflexive and drew on elements of action research, intuitively following an iterative cycle of planning, action, observation and critical reflection.

Kemmis (2009) defines action research as aiming to change three things: 'practitioners' practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions in which they practise'. These three are bound together in an 'unstable and volatile' way, with each shaping the other, in an 'endless dance in which each asserts itself, attempting to take the lead, and each reacts to the others'.

Within my study, these elements (the practice, understanding of practice, conditions of practice) were interdependent and were driven by, and impacted by the creative investigations. The creative process began with a loose concept for new artwork, followed by an intuitive and exploratory method of art-making which allowed for serendipity and failure. I gained understanding during the creation of, and critical reflection on the artwork which built on insights from earlier works, allowing me to ascribe accumulative meaning to my research. This new understanding raised new questions, which became a

catalyst for the next artistic undertaking within the ‘planning, action, observation, reflection’ cycle.

3. Methods

The emphasis in the research was on the creative process, outputs and critical reflection, and this was underpinned by broader research.

The practicalities included:

- A studio component culminating in an exhibition of the artefacts
- case studies on the motivations and creative practice of contemporary artists
- a broad survey of contextual theoretical and practical discourse around the topic
- this critical analysis and supporting evidential documentation including a film and commentary on the exhibition; and annotated photographic documentation of the research journey

Studio Component and Exhibition

The studio component comprised a bricolage of original artistic investigations within the *Migrant* and the *Me* strands with ongoing consideration of the eventual impact of the work on the viewer, the *You*.

Prior to this study, I had practised primarily as a painter. My decision for my research to be reflexive led to unplanned and unexpected developments including the use of a wide range of traditional and non-traditional materials and processes which took me out of my ‘comfort zone’. This represented a metaphorical displacement for me as a practitioner, from a safe, familiar place to foreign and challenging territory.

The completion of each significant artwork spawned a multitude of new ideas and the generation of new exploratory artworks. The creation of these was accompanied by ongoing reflective and critical analysis, either through personal reflection or in active engagement with peer groups, supervisors and periodic reviews. When a single piece or idea emerged with greater relevance, aesthetic, or conceptual merit, the other preparatory works were abandoned, and the dominant work was seen through to completion before the iterative cycle started again.

The main artworks then underwent a further selection process during curation for a public group exhibition, *in sight* (2018) at the Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury. My criteria for inclusion in the exhibition was that each artefact should stand in its own right, while also connecting visually and temporally with the other works and within the space. My works were grouped in one room of the shared gallery space and were curated in a way that served to place and displace the viewer. The installation became the ‘meeting place’ that united the *Migrant*, *Me* and *You* elements of the research.

While critical analysis of the *Migrant* and *Me* strands was ongoing during the making of, and subsequent display of the works, scrutiny of the *You* strand took the form of reflection of viewer responses to the exhibition through my own observation, conversations and visitors’ comments.

Artist Case Studies

The research sought to understand my practice and outputs in the wider context, through analysis of contemporary artists working on similar themes. While there were many who could have been included in my analysis, I narrowed my selection to six artists whose practice, artwork or life stories had most meaning for me; who were accommodated in

one or more of the *Migrants*, *Me* and *You* strands of my research; and who worked in a variety of media (performance art, installation, painting, sculpture, film and photography). These artists were Ai Weiwei, Michael Armitage, Marlene Dumas, Mona Hatoum, William Kentridge, and Richard Mosse.

I researched written work on their practice; reviews and interviews; and experienced their work through exhibition, screening or performance. I explored the artist's background, motivation, engagement with socio-political issues, and the place of the viewer within their work. I sought themes and narratives that suggested displacement and I looked interpretively at content, imagery, medium, spatial context, form, materials and processes that could be perceived to be used (consciously or subconsciously) to portray a sense of being placed or being displaced.

Four common thematic elements emerged which formed a framework for researching my case studies:

- the displaced artist within the artwork – whether the artist could be said to feature directly or indirectly in their work and whether their work became representative of their own place or displacement
- use/subversion of content, process, material, imagery, scale, context to represent displacement
- the place of, and displacement of the viewer
- consideration of the aestheticisation of suffering within their work

I applied the same thematic analysis to my own practice and sought to identify areas of commonality with, and difference from, the selected artists. Familiarity with the work of

these artists would inevitably have influenced my creative output directly or indirectly, and I have indicated where I have been able to identify this influence.

Theoretical Context

My research was further underpinned by engagement with a range of theoretical work on cultural identity, diaspora, migration and exile, and aesthetics¹.

Critical Analysis

This text is the critical analysis which contextualises the practical work undertaken and demonstrates how the practice addressed the research questions. It is supported by further analysis in *The Migrants, Me and You – Film of the Exhibition* (2019) and in *The Migrants, Me and You – Research Journey* (Porter, 2019).

4. Migration and Art

There is much theoretical and practical work that deals with themes of art and exile/migration/diaspora, and the discourse on this subject is rapidly changing in response to current migration and global events.

We live in an era of growing economic inequality attributed to the failure of liberal globalisation to deliver on its promise of free markets, deregulated travel and access to equality for all. This has resulted in increased movement of people who find themselves shut out at borders and denied access to better standards of living and equality, in what Demos (2013) calls *crisis globalization*.

¹ including writing by John Berger, Iain Chambers, T.J. Demos, Dominic Griffiths and Maria Prozesky, Stuart Hall, Mark Israel, Michael Kelly, Susan Sontag and Edward Said

In a globalised age, modernity-as-exile renders us all migrants. Said (2013, p. 180) suggests the scale of events in this current age ‘with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers - is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration’. Migration has become ‘not only a social or political condition but a universal experience that seemingly everyone has faced at some point ... either physically, spiritually or emotionally’ (Josenhans, 2017, p. 21).

Globalised mobility has seen the theme of migration emerge as a dominant subject matter in art, and has radically changed the way art is produced, displayed and received, which invites a ‘rethinking of existing perspectives in postcolonial, transnational, and diaspora studies, and laying the foundation for empirical and theoretical directions beyond the terms of these traditional frameworks’ (Guha, 2011, p. Cover copy).

In his study on the artistic and visual representation of ‘mobile lives’ (migrants, refugees, the stateless and dispossessed), Demos (2013, p. 245) proposes that displacement and migration can no longer be seen as exclusively negative or tragic (as evoked by the term ‘exile’) but as something transformative which offers creative possibilities beyond identity. He highlights the significance of the use of moving images in documentary art and the ramifications for aesthetics and politics today. This innovative use of new media, has seen artists blurring ‘the divisions between fact and fiction, in order to propose a new politics of truth, one founded in contingency and self-transformation, and attached to critical doubt and political deliberation’² (Demos, 2013, p. 245). The destabilisation of

² Artists in Demos’ study who ‘blur the real and imaginary’ include Steve McQueen, the Otolith Group and Hito Steyerl

traditional documentary models reflects the ‘uprooting’ that is associated with the migratory condition and challenges the traditional discourse on migration theory.

While Demos’ analytical approach to the artists in his study focuses on the political aspects, Kelly (2014) suggests that many of these artists could be said to work in ways that connect them to migratory aesthetics – a relatively new concept which accounts for the aesthetic dimension of the migratory experience and its impact on contemporary artistic practices and within societies. Migratory aesthetics, a term coined by Mieke Bal, Dutch cultural theorist, has its origins in global issues (such as identity, memory and post colonialism) and is a ‘construct’ defined as ‘not exactly an aesthetic category, nor a stylistic one, nor an artistic movement, it defines, and is defined by problems, practices, situations, and theories’ (Bal cited in Kelly, 2014). Within migratory aesthetics, a work of art is not a mimetic representation of society, it ‘is’ society. The artwork becomes ‘a platform that demands reflection’.

A significant trait within migratory aesthetics is the ‘double, contradictory movement, composed of stagnation and mobility’ and many artists represent or allude to this double movement in their work (Kelly, 2014). A further characteristic of migratory aesthetics is displacement experienced, not only geographically, but in time - something Bal (cited in Kelly, 2014) calls *heterochrony*. The migratory experience is the ‘presence of the past within the present’ and art that addresses the migratory experience, reflects this reality by creating spaces and experiences which ‘incorporate techniques, processes and modes of narration penetrated by alternative temporalities that bond, integrate, or directly clash and produce conflict’.

The video, as a medium, provides a way to characterise the counter-temporal mobility of the migratory condition; a way to represent the double-ness of the migrant experience and the bi-directional movement between *home* and *here*, between homeland and host country, past and present (Kelly, 2014).

The prevalence of the use of moving image is reflected in the work of many of the artists I researched and four from my case studies use film in their work in some way (Hatoum, Ai, Kentridge, Mosse) which perhaps reflects this new way of articulating displacement.

When reflecting on my own practice then, it is interesting that though I see myself as a painter, my decision to engage with unfamiliar materials and media resulted in an unplanned foray into the moving image. The film, *Time Lapse* (2018) began as a photographic record of the painting process for the *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* layered painting, but evolved into a time lapse film and artwork in its own right. In being shown alongside the painting in the exhibition, it became representative (as the title suggests) of time and the lapse of time; of memory and loss and the fluid nature of identity. It became a metaphor for the migratory experience of movement and standing still; of past and present and of double-ness. While my use of film for the first time in my work was a chance happening that emerged from the process, it is apparent that the choice of medium serves the temporal nature of my own migration and that this work taps into wider contemporary practice within migratory aesthetics.

5. My Journey

A challenge throughout my research was to establish how I am placed/displaced as migrant, artist and observer of events, and how this impacts my creative practice.

My situation is complicated, and I have yet to define my status as migrant, exile or as diasporan. As a white Zambian-born daughter of a South African father and British mother, South African raised, with South African and British citizenship, a UK resident, I am a person and artist out of place. My departure from South Africa was tied up with my British husband's status. He had to leave for political reasons, and I followed. We were exiled as a couple, but I was not exiled as a person. My migration to the UK was seamless by virtue of colonial privilege, birth right and marriage. I was a member of, what Cunningham (cited in Israel, 1999, p. 3) calls a 'silent tribe', 'the strangest of minorities': a white, English-speaking South African whose arrival in the United Kingdom was, for politicians and the anti-immigration lobby 'uncontentious' (Israel, 1999, p. 4).

Until work began on this practice research, I had never revisited my migration, or addressed my South African heritage through my art practice. I believe this can be attributed to the fact my migration happened at the height of the apartheid years and, like many white South Africans, I carried the weight of collective responsibility for the things being done in the country in my name. It was not a comfortable position and I quickly tried to assimilate or disappear in my newly-adopted homeland.

According to Israel, (1999, p. 1), in 1991, there were 70,000 South African-born people living in the United Kingdom. Many had emigrated for family or economic reasons or in response to periods of upheaval in the country. A small number were political activists and they, along with others who felt they had had to leave, saw themselves as exiles. In interviews with these exiled South Africans, Israel (1999, p. 57) identifies two different types of response. The first narratives presented as polished, well-worn linear tales with the departee portrayed as a hero with compelling accounts of their exit from the country. At the opposite end of the spectrum, accounts were more fragmented with the departee

coming across as ‘vulnerable, torn between conflicting loyalties and pressures’. The suggestion is that many white South Africans who did ‘escape’ at that time, believed that stressing their own stories undermined and detracted from the ongoing oppression in South Africa. Not all embraced the identity of an exile. ‘They were no longer simply South African for they no longer lived in the country, and they wished to distance themselves from the apartheid regime. They were not exactly British either’ (Israel, 1999, p. 157). I identify as this displaced deportee whose story remained untold. There were more urgent stories, and there were people better placed to recount them.

When images of migrant boats in the Mediterranean started appearing in the news, something changed. I felt a growing urge to create work in response. This sense of obligation was also possibly linked to my personal history. Doosje *et al*, cited in Klandermans *et al*, (2008, p. 333), studied behavioural responses to collective guilt. They found that when people in an ingroup are made aware of unfair treatment towards an out-group, some try to right the wrongs and to compensate the out-group for the ingroup’s behaviour.

This was how I was placed when this research began: someone who was placed/displaced in both worlds and in neither, who had no right to a voice in either world, yet who carried a need to atone for the past.

When exploring further the peculiarities of the displaced white South African ‘condition’, I encountered the work of Griffiths and Prozesky (2010) who used Charles Taylor’s concept of the social imaginary and Martin Heidegger’s concept of dwelling to explain the incongruence between white South Africans’ pre- and post-apartheid experiences of home and identity.

During the apartheid era, South Africans' social imaginary (the way they imagined their social existence and how they fit with others) was based on legalised racial discrimination which was at odds with events in a world that was embracing emancipation and equality (Griffiths and Prozesky, 2010).

Heidegger's concept of 'dwelling' is more than just about living in a geographical or physical space, but about engaging meaningfully with four inter-relational elements of what he calls the fourfold: earth, sky, mortals and divinities. If the social imaginary informs the way we 'dwell', then living under the inherently flawed political construct that was apartheid, meant that after the fall of apartheid, South Africans lost the 'home' in which they thought they dwelt. This left them with an existential homelessness, which Griffiths and Prozesky (2010) believe resulted in the mass emigration from South Africa.

My migration happened before the end of apartheid and for reasons other than those cited in their research, but I identify with this sense of being displaced not just geographically, but by the 'existential homelessness' as a white South African.

6. Artworks in the Exhibition

The practice research culminated in a public exhibition of selected works at a group show, *in sight* (2018), at the Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury (June 2018). The 2D works were hung along two adjacent walls; 3D work was placed in the space (Fig. 2) and a time lapse film was playing alongside the painting whose process it depicted (Fig. 3).



Figure 2 Laurie Porter (2018) in sight Exhibition, Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury



Figure 3 Laurie Porter (2018) in sight Exhibition [Film installation]

I list only exhibited works here as these were the ones exposed to public scrutiny. More detailed critical analysis of the research journey and all artworks (exhibited and not exhibited) is presented in the accompanying *Film* and *Research Journey* documentation. I have cross referenced the artworks mentioned in this text with these documents with a time stamp or page number accordingly and the hope is that the reader will be able to reference both the *Film* and *Research Journey* documentation while reading this text.

[The Migrant Strand](#)

(‘Journey’, pp. 9-55) (‘Film’, 00:01:36)

The *Migrant* artworks aimed to represent the displacement of migrants. I followed a reflexive approach, allowing each artwork to inform the next.

What transpired was a journey with several works stationed as waypoints along the way.

Counting the Cost (2016-18) (Figs. 4-6) (‘Journey’, pp. 13-34) (‘Film’, 00:01:45) was the first artwork in my practice research. It comprised seventy-six paintings on a roll of till receipt paper, a rollcall in response to media images of migrant journeys.

Some images were ultimately framed while others remained on the till roll and hung as a strip beside the framed pieces to illustrate the process. A reflexive approach to my research meant these paintings became the first link in a series of works that was to follow.



Figure 4 Laurie Porter (2016-18) Counting the Cost – making process



Figure 5 Laurie Porter (2016-18) Counting the Cost [Acrylic on till receipt paper]

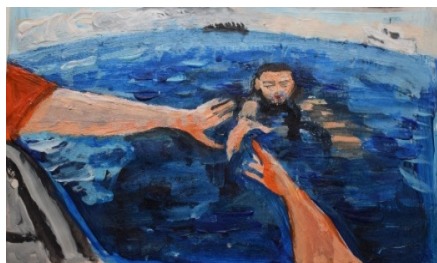


Figure 6 Laurie Porter (2016-18) *Counting the Cost* - Selection of individual paintings
[Acrylic on till receipt paper]

Hazardous Materials (2018) (Fig. 7) ('Journey', pp. 44-48) ('Film', 00:03:05) is a three-dimensional biohazard suit covered with subverted black and white copies of the individual *Counting the Cost* paintings. It was suspended in the centre of the exhibition space and viewers were encouraged to navigate around the artwork to 'read' the images.



Figure 7 Laurie Porter (2018) *Hazardous Materials* [Photocopied images on biohazard suit]

Three supplementary works accompanied this figure. The first was a 'found' artwork called, *the eerie sound of emergency blankets rustling on the deck of a ship* (Fig. 8) ('Journey', p. 48) ('Film', 00:06:01). This was an emergency blanket of the type issued

to people during rescues. It was pegged on the wall to one side of *Hazardous Materials*, acting as a foil to reflect (and therefore implicate) the viewer.



Figure 8 Laurie Porter (2018) the eerie sound of emergency blankets rustling on the deck of a ship [Emergency Blanket]

A found poem, *Hazmat Suit* (Fig. 9) ('Journey', p. 49) ('Film', 00:04:39) was pasted on the wall alongside the blanket. The poem was made up of phrases taken from hazmat suit specifications or instructions and when read alongside the *Hazardous Materials* piece, alluded to the toxic nature of rhetoric around migration issues.

Hazmat Suit

Classic hooded coverall
with stitched external seams;
elasticated ankles, wrists, face;
elasticated (stitched in) waist.
Zipper flap. Antistat-
-ic (on the outside)
White.

Sturdy, lightweight, breathability;
optimised protection, durability;
comfortable, ergonomic for optimum fit.
Offers high freedom of movement.

Category III Certification.
Protects from radioactive contamination;
from sensitive products, sensitive processes,
biological and chemical substances.
Protects against contamination
by people.

Resistant to flex cracking and abrasion,
trapezoidal tear, to puncture, to penetration
by contaminated liquids,
blood borne-pathogens,
body fluids, blood.
Resistant to penetration
by people.

Do not wash.
Do not iron.
Do not machine dry.
Incinerate or bury
in controlled landfill.

*Phrases taken from specifications and instructions for use of hazardous materials
(hazmat) suits.*

Figure 9 Laurie Porter (2018) Hazmat Suit [Poem]

The third piece connected to *Hazardous Materials*, was a floor-based sculpture, *My Failed Boats* (Fig. 10) ('Journey', pp. 50-51) ('Film', 00:06:46). This artwork was a tray placed at the base of the hanging figure, containing my failed attempts at making small rubber dinghies. These were filled with paper rubbings discarded from the *Hazardous Materials* making process, and which felt reminiscent of bleached human figures.



Figure 10 Laurie Porter (2018) *My Failed Boats* [Paper rubbings, bubble wrap, clear tubing]

The final piece in the *Migrant Strand* is called *Displaced* (Figs. 11-12) ('Journey', pp. 52-55) ('Film', 00:07:37) - a series of tiny three-dimensional painted figures created from the cast-off paper rubbings from *Hazardous Materials* and mounted individually on the wall to resemble a wave of people on the move.



Figure 11 Laurie Porter (2018) *Displaced* - detail [Paper and acrylic]



Figure 12 Laurie Porter (2018) *Displaced* [Paper and acrylic]

The *Me* Strand

(‘Journey’, pp. 56-74) (‘Film’, 00:08:17).

The research within the *Me* strand explored how I am placed/displaced by my migration, which inevitably led to investigations into identity and self.

The main artwork was a palimpsestic painting *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* (Fig. 13) (‘Journey’, pp. 65-69) (‘Film’, 00:08:20) - a multi-layered painting which explored my pre- and post-migrational selves, working through images from each of my two worlds and finishing with an iconic image drawn from a photograph of the death of a schoolboy during the Soweto uprising (Nzima, 1976) (Fig. 14) (‘Film’, 00:11:50).



Figure 14 Sam Nzima (1976) Soweto Riots [Photograph]



Figure 13 Laurie Porter (2017-2018) *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* [Acrylic on canvas]

The stages in this painting's making process were recorded in photographs (Fig. 15), some of which were stitched together to create a film called *Time Lapse* (2018) (Fig. 16) ('Journey', p. 69) ('Film', 00:08:32, 00:12:40) which was played on loop during the exhibition alongside the painting.



Figure 15 Laurie Porter (2017-18) *Time Lapse* - selection of stills [Photographs]



Figure 16 Laurie Porter (2017-18) *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* [Acrylic on Canvas] & *Time Lapse* [Film]

The final painting, *Invisible Migrant* (Fig. 17) (2018) ('Journey', pp. 73-74) ('Film', 00:14:13) was autobiographical, depicting my own migration flying into the United Kingdom, while current migrant events play out in the Mediterranean Sea beneath. It refers to my status as 'invisible migrant' as a white South African in the UK, while alluding to the invisibility of current events. This painting represented a bringing together of the two strands and the merging of my past and the present.



Figure 17 Laurie Porter (2018) *Invisible Migrant* [Acrylic on Canvas]

The You Strand

(‘Journey’, pp. 75-81) (‘Film’, 00:17:28).

The place of the viewer in my research, the *You* strand, was assessed through the engagement of visitors to the exhibition. The artefacts were exhibited in a shared gallery space, appearing on two adjoining walls and with three-dimensional work hanging or placed in the centre of the space (Fig. 18). The work was curated in a way that encouraged the viewer to navigate the space around the artworks; to look up or down; and to step towards or away from the artwork. They were placed or displaced by the artwork (physically and psychologically), by the non-traditional materials and processes, by the subject matter and curation.



Figure 18 Visitors at the *in sight* Exhibition (2018) Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury

7. Artistic Context

A central part of this practice research was the critical analysis of other artists and their work within the framework of my own research questions, to place myself and my artwork in a wider artistic context.

The artists in my case studies offered areas of commonality with, or difference from, my practice. My relationship with each, and their impact on my work, was very different.

The Artists and Me

As outlined previously, the selected artists fell into one or more of three sub-groups within my research.

The first sub-group comprised artists in exile (voluntary or involuntary), who live and work in a country other than their homeland and whose work depicts, or can be seen to come from, a place of displacement. These were Mona Hatoum, Ai Weiwei, Marlene Dumas and Michael Armitage.

The second sub-group, including William Kentridge, Dumas and Armitage, are artists who have connections with Africa and whose narratives, I anticipated, may have something in common with mine.

The third subset was made up of artists Kentridge and Richard Mosse, who are not migrants but who are, it could be argued, displaced in other ways and who work on themes of migration, diaspora and displacement.

Of these artists, Mosse and Armitage had previously been unknown to me, but seeing their work for the first time had an immediate and positive impact on my practice.

I experienced Mosse's immersive film installation *Incoming* (2017) (Fig. 19) at a time when I was exploring the representation of dehumanisation and re-humanisation of people through image and process. Mosse's use of a military-grade thermal-imaging camera to record migrants from a distance resulted in uncanny black and white footage of people, anonymised and rendered featureless (and sometimes grotesque) by the process, but whose humanity is reinstated somehow by the very human gestures and movements. The viewer is implicated by being immersed in the same space as these larger-than-life images. They are no longer bystanders and need to consider how they are placed with regards to the subject matter.



Figure 19 Richard Mosse (2017) Incoming [Installation] – Photo credit: Tristan Fewings / Getty Images for The Barbican

Visitors to Armitage's exhibition *Michael Armitage: Peace Coma* (2017) were implicated in the artworks in a different way in being seduced by the aesthetic which belied the distressing subject matter that became apparent only on closer inspection. In e.g. *Strange Fruit* (2016) (Fig. 20), a depiction of a lynching, the viewer is engaged with the colour and texture before closer inspection reveals the violent content indicated by two small feet high in the branches. This echoed the contradictions between subject matter and aesthetic I was using in my work to challenge the viewer in e.g. *Counting the Cost*.



Figure 20 Michael Armitage (2016) *Strange Fruit* [Oil on lubugo bark]

My instant and positive response to the work of Mosse and Armitage was in contrast to my impressions of the later artwork in Hatoum's Exhibition (Mona Hatoum, 2016).

Hatoum's early performance work is accessible on an intimate, emotional level. In *Roadworks* (1985), Hatoum recorded herself walking through the streets with boots tied to her feet, a commentary on the political unrest in 1980s Brixton (with Dr Martens being the footwear of choice by police and activists). Hatoum later exhibited a still of the piece in 1995 which was placed against a wall in the gallery, mirroring the feet of passing visitors, implicating them in a different way and through a different medium (Fig. 21).



Figure 21 Mona Hatoum (1985-1995) *Roadworks* Performance Still [Photograph]

In later sculpture, film and installation work, Hatoum shunned this overt delivery of the message in favour of engaging the viewer in a more physical way through the materials (rather than her body) with the meaning only realised afterwards. An example of this is *Grater Divide* (2002) (Fig. 22), a surreal giant cross-between a room divider and a cheese grater, where this familiar object with its sharp grating surfaces presents an implied

danger due to the scale of the piece. I would argue that the undeniable seductiveness of the materials and meticulous execution of later works, come at the cost of instant emotional engagement with the content. Cumming (2016) agrees, ‘The ideas are there, but not the visceral effect’.



Figure 22 Mona Hatoum, (2002) Grater Divide [Sculpture] – Photo credit Nils Jorgensen/Rex/Shutterstock

Dumas also demonstrates mastery of process which could be said to create some of the appeal within her work. She has a radical approach in her use of paint (using washes of turpentine to achieve a translucent effect) and an intimacy with the painting surface which is seductive to the viewer (Williamson, 2009, p.60), but the content and imagery are ‘resistant’ and challenging (van Niekerk, 2008, p. 111).

There is a disturbing grotesqueness in her representation of bodies and portraits such as in *The First People – I-IV* (1990) (Fig. 23). Dumas suggests this may be due to the size of the images. (*Kentridge & Dumas in Conversation, 2009*).



Figure 23 Marlene Dumas (1990) *The First People (I-IV)* [Oil on Canvas]

The term ‘grotesque’ could be used to describe the figures in my artwork *Displaced*, but any challenge from my tiny migrants is diffused by their size. My intention in my practice was for a gentle, accessible emotional engagement with the viewer, followed later by the visceral realisation of meaning, perhaps a position that lies somewhere between the overtly challenging offer in Dumas’s paintings, and the more elusive access to meaning in Hatoum’s later works.

There were obvious reasons, within my study, for the inclusion of Ai (as renowned exilic artist dissident) and Kentridge (as an artist living and working in South Africa). My relationship with each was initially muted and lacked the instantaneous connection I had had with the work of Mosse and Armitage and did not have the tangible but uncomfortable response I’d had to the works of Hatoum and Dumas.

My original disquiet about aspects of Ai's work related to the artist's frequent inclusion of himself in his artwork. I questioned whether this detracted from the work and whether it was exploitative, most recently in his representation of the drowned migrant child, in *Ai Weiwei poses as Aylan Kurdi for India Today magazine* (2016) (Fig 24).



Figure 24 Ai Weiwei (2016) Ai Weiwei poses as Aylan Kurdi for India Today magazine. [Photograph]

My perception changed after viewing Ai's documentary film, *Human Flow* (2017). Ai is featured in this film in brief appearances offering helpless gestures of solidarity, such as having his hair cut in a migrant camp or offering a weeping interviewee a tissue. He appears aware of his powerlessness. I gained an understanding of how he was trying to be a single voice shouting to be heard in the enormity of events, an outward-looking communication in contrast to Hatoum's introspective approach.

Kentridge's work is a combination of an introspective contemplation with an expansive projection outward. In his recent grand scale performance, *The Head and the Load* (2018) (Fig. 25), Kentridge addresses colonialism and the role that African men and women played in WW1, in a performance that overwhelms and implicates the audience. In the programme for the performance, Morris (2018) suggests that the chaotic, confused and absurd nature of the performance was deliberate as 'how else can one reflect the scale of the disaster and the senselessness of losing one's life for a cause this is not one's own?'



Figure 25 William Kentridge (2018) *The Head and the Load* [Performance] – Photo credit: Stephanie Berger

Kentridge was the artist I most hoped to connect with because of our shared South African heritage but who, initially, felt the most elusive. This was perhaps because I identify as a painter while Kentridge, despite his apparent limitless skills (drawing, film-making, performance, multi-media), states he is not, nor could be, a painter (*Kentridge & Dumas in Conversation, 2009*). I found his work complex, challenging and overwhelming but I realise now this is the artist's intention. The difficult topics he addresses should be challenging to engage with.

While I could clearly identify the influence on my work of some of the artists in my study (Armitage and Mosse), it was only on review at the point of exhibition that it became apparent how many parallels there were between my work and Kentridge's. These included the importance of the curation of the artworks as an installation; the range of media presented within the installation; the concerns with identity and memory through the use of mark-making and erasing (as in my *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* painting); the use of film to record the transient (in my piece *Time Lapse*); the use of process as metaphor (in *Counting the Cost*) and the embrace of accident, chance or mistake within the work (in *My Failed Boats*). The question remains whether these connections were a direct and subconscious influence because of my research into Kentridge or whether the connections were made once I was more conversant with his work.

Critical analysis of the artists and their artworks

When reflecting on the body of work by these artists and on my own artwork, I identified four pertinent themes which I suggest have a bearing on the visual representation of being placed/displaced in the artistic output:

- i) The displaced artist within the work
- ii) Use of, or subversion of, process, material, image and scale
- iii) The place of the viewer and displacement of the viewer
- iv) Aestheticisation of suffering

What follows is a discussion which explores these themes and identifies commonality or difference in approach within my own practice and that of the artists.

The displaced artist within the work

My life journey and uncertain status as migrant or exile, is outlined earlier. When I began my practice research, my focus was on a creative response to current migrant events and there was initially no intention to create autobiographical work. The *Me* strand began only after the realisation that part of the motivation to address current events, was due to the unexplored and unresolved issues around my own migration.

If, as Hall (1990, p. 225) suggests, identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’, and that understanding is gained from more than a mere delving into the past, then I needed to represent my identity as in a state of flux, in a state of ‘becoming’. This new insight fed into the main exhibited works from the *Me* strand, namely the layered painting *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* and *Time Lapse* (the film of its making), that reflected the transient nature of my identity and the duality of my status as someone displaced.

In the film of the exhibition, I describe how I used Heidegger’s concept of dwelling and the fourfold, as a loose visual framework to work through my pre- and post-migrational selves (‘Film’, 00:10:22). This enabled me to build aspects of my identity in the sequential layering representing my interpretation of the fourfold for each of my worlds, with the ‘earth, sky, divinities and mortals’ taken by me as meaning ‘landscape, weather, people, culture/religion’. The use of canvas pieces to mask the painting as I worked, preserved sections of painting which, when lifted, revealed a ‘memory’ from a previous layer.

The final image in *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* freezes a moment that links me forever as the child at boarding school displaced from her family, with a pivotal moment in South African history in the photograph by Nzima of a black schoolboy (the same age as I was at the time) shot dead in the Soweto uprising in 1976. This point in my history was a moment of realisation of how I was placed within a country which displaced others by virtue of their skin colour. The weight of my South African past and the accompanying sense of collective guilt is foregrounded by this final image in my palimpsestic work which sits amidst fragments of under- and over-paintings of previous layers of my South African and English selves. My place in this piece is part of my own personal narrative and an acknowledgement of events which displaced me, and which place me as a person and an artist today.

I sought to understand how the personal histories of my selected artists may be impacting their practice. The artists within the *Migrant* category of my study, fall into two sub-groups: Hatoum and Ai as artists in exile and Armitage and Dumas as voluntary migrants.

Despite their very different cultural backgrounds, Ai and Hatoum share the experience of having being displaced along with their families from a very early age, followed by a period of exile later in their lives when they were unable to return home: Hatoum because of the war in Lebanon; and Ai following his detention in China in 2011 after which he moved to Berlin. The displacement for each manifested in their works in very different ways.

Hatoum's work is about 'living in the West as a person from the Third World, about being an outsider, about occupying a marginal position, being excluded, being defined as *Other* or as one of *Them*' (Diamond, 1997, p. 127). Her early performance work was in keeping with her understanding of herself as 'other' through the use of her body to represent both her personal displacement and the wider cultural displacement linked to events in Palestine e.g. in *The Negotiating Table*, (1983) (Fig. 26), an overtly political piece referencing Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Hatoum speaks of this as 'delivering a message to the viewer' (Antoni, 1998).



Figure 26 Mona Hatoum (1983) *The Negotiating Table* [Performance Art] – Photo credit: David Airey

In later works, Hatoum consciously moves away from the performance work to focus on sculpture and large scale installation where ‘things are implied and not directly stated’ (Archer, 1997, p. 12). Even when she no longer features within her artwork, Hatoum’s work suggests a yearning for home. In *Homebound* (2000) (Fig. 27), the electrification of a domestic kitchen scene is made menacing and is, I suggest, an experience of home that is fractured and elusive. Hatoum undertakes an exercise in home-making which, by design, results in the safe and familiar becoming threatening.



Figure 27 Mona Hatoum (2000), *Homebound* [Installation] – Photo credit: White Cube

Home for Ai, as a small boy, was of poverty in exile with his family, and a past that had ‘... no mystical and magnificent sky, no beautiful and moving fairy tales, no endless warmth of home, no colourful flower, no graceful music’ (Moore, 2011).

Ai's motivation in his work is shaped by his life experiences. He describes his father's 'unthinkable journey' (through political exile), as just one story in a broader human struggle and one which he needs to articulate in his work. He says it is the individual's responsibility to decide whether to respond to events through their work and that he does it because he has 'no choice' (Vine, 2018). 'We have only a moment to speak out or to present what little skills we have...' (Brooks, 2017).

Ai's experience of home, in common with Hatoum's, is at odds with his perception of what 'home' should be. He too creates work that destroys the illusion of home. In *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) (Fig. 28), Ai shatters a 2,000-year-old urn, in a symbolic challenge to, and letting go of the traditional cultural values of his homeland - a very shocking and public statement.



Figure 28 Ai Weiwei, (1995) Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn [Photographs]

Unlike Hatoum, Ai's approach is outward-looking and he uses his international platform to raise awareness of issues – most notably using social media to do this. 'I do not have a home country. My native country is the internet' (Nurtsch, 2017).

It is interesting to compare Hatoum and Ai as 'exiles' with Dumas and Armitage, as artists who voluntarily chose to work in a country other than their homeland.

Dumas emigrated to The Netherlands in 1976 from a South Africa immersed in huge political upheaval. This projected her ‘... into a liminal space between exile and integration – a critical space from which to observe and respond to the politics, society and culture of apartheid’ (Bedford, 2008, p. 34).

In *The White Disease* (1985) (Fig. 29), Dumas foregrounds whiteness as a medical condition, alluding to her position as a white South African in the face of anti-apartheid sentiment that existed in parts of Europe in the 1980s (Bedford, 2008, p. 37).



Figure 29 Marlene Dumas (1985) *The White Disease* [Oil on canvas]

The cultural reference to South Africa appears to feature less directly in later works, though her focus on painting portraits could be seen to be an attempt at finding a ‘sense of self through a process of rigorous self-scrutiny’ (Bedford, 2008, p. 36).

I would go further in suggesting that Dumas's practice of exhibiting her portraits in groupings, such as in *Rejects* (1994) (Fig. 30) is an attempt by the artist to build a relationship between the individuals, to recreate a 'family', a sense of belonging, and to make sense of her own displacement.



Figure 30 Marlene Dumas (1994) *Rejects* [Ink, acrylic and chalk on paper]

Cultural references abound in the work of Armitage. He is Kenyan-born but lives and works in both Nairobi and London. Much of the narrative and imagery in Armitage's paintings derive from his East African heritage but the style and colour he uses reflect his Royal Academy training (he often bases his work on that of Gauguin, Titian and Goya). His relationship to his two cultures is unique and 'his sense of purpose arises from a conscious negotiation of that duality' (Malbert, 2018, p. 78).

Armitage, like Dumas, is not directly represented in his works, however his double-ness is evident in his paintings which link to his African roots while alluding to his traditional art training. In *#mydressmychoice* (2015) (Fig. 31), Armitage's response to a video on social media of a woman being assaulted in Nairobi for wearing a miniskirt features a nude reminiscent of Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*.



Figure 31 Michael Armitage (2015) #mydressmychoice [Oil on lubugo bark cloth]

Any duality in the work of Kentridge, as an artist whose work is in, and of, South Africa, comes not from someone displaced between two worlds but as someone displaced within his own world. Rosenthal (2009, p. 37) quotes Kentridge as saying he lives in a state of marginality as ‘at the edge of huge social upheavals yet also removed from them, this for the obvious reason of his skin colour’. Besides his race, Kentridge felt ‘other’ too, being Jewish in a white Christian country (Rosenthal, 2009, p.37), and he is further displaced as an artist on the ‘periphery’ of the art world, being from a country so preoccupied with its own political and social turmoil that it rendered the concerns of the global art centres irrelevant (Sotiriadi, 1999).

Kentridge features prominently in his artwork as witness, describing himself appearing as ‘the third person’ (*Kentridge & Dumas in Conversation*, 2009). He frequently uses ‘doubles’ to explore his conflicting ‘identities’ and to reflect how he is placed/displaced within the unique South African context. In his animated films, *9 Drawings for Projection* (1989-2003), the two recurring characters, Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitelbaum, provide an autobiographical means for Kentridge to deal with his ‘hybrid, shifting identity within a largely autobiographical context’ (Sotiriadi, 1999). This transient identity is portrayed for e.g. in the fifth film of the series, *Felix in Exile* (1994) (Fig. 32) where in one scene, Kentridge’s reflection in the mirror gradually changes to reflect the African character, Nandi, who plays the role in the film as witness and recorder of evidence. Felix (Kentridge) is being challenged on his position.



Figure 32 William Kentridge (1994) *Felix in Exile* - mirror image detail [Still]

Kentridge concedes there is no way of knowing the extent to which events in South Africa find their way into his work, even on unrelated themes, (*Kentridge & Dumas in Conversation*, 2009) but he accepts that our approach to the world is ‘very much in terms of what is happening inside us’ (Rosenthal, 2009, p. 37).

Mosse, as a documentary film-maker and photographer, is also placed as an observer and commentator. Born in Ireland, Mosse was raised in a Quaker home, something he says afforded him a ‘double identity’ as someone belonging to two different groups. He believes the pacifism of Quakerism is something that drives his need to document conflict and war. In addition, Mosse places himself outside the traditional photo-journalism school saying he wanted to take the medium of documentary photography and ‘throw it against the wall’ (Mosse, 2014). He, like Kentridge, finds himself out of step with his contemporaries.

Mosse does not appear directly in his films but acknowledges the complicity of the photographer, saying of *Incoming* (2017) (Fig. 33), that there is a ‘levelling effect’ in the use of the camera which doesn’t only dehumanise the migrants but dehumanises the photographer and dehumanises us all (Mosse, 2017a).



Figure 33 Richard Mosse (2017) *Incoming* [Still]

I have illustrated how I and my chosen artists are placed by an intrinsic need to create work, which could be attributed to a personal displacement in one shape or form, and the extrinsic need to communicate the issues which, it could be argued, is linked in some way to this displacement.

Process and materials, image, scale

For all the differences in how the artists place themselves or are placed within their artwork, a critical analysis of their work, process and output reveals common practical elements which serve the representation of being placed or being displaced. These are paralleled in my work where I have used these elements consciously or subconsciously.

I identify these elements as:

Use of, or subversion of:

- i) process and materials
- ii) image
- iii) scale

In my practice research, I was conscious of the significance of process not only as a means of achieving outcomes, but as a way of lending artistic integrity to the eventual artwork.

The process and materials were sometimes subverted to give better meaning to the practice and the artwork.

I make use of subversion of process and materials in my work. In the *Migrant* strand, the winding on of till receipt paper in *Counting the Cost* symbolised the relentlessness of migrant journeys and the ‘disposable’ nature of the lives of the people involved. In the making of the figures in *Displaced*, the rescue of the paper rubbings (of what is discarded and lost) takes on a significance considering the subject matter. In addition, the paper rubbings presented technical challenges and sometimes dissolved during the painting process, causing ‘people’ to disappear before my eyes – a metaphor for the loss of life during migrant journeys.

Within the *Me* strand, the masking and unmasking in the making of *Between Worlds*, *Worlds Between* alluded to memory and forgetting; and the layering represented hybridised identity.

The choice of untraditional materials was driven partly by my reflexive practice but also served to surprise (perhaps displace) the viewer who was presented with e.g. a till roll as a strip of paintings, a biohazard suit as a person hanging in space, and paper cast-offs standing in for people.

Of the artists in my study, it is Kentridge who stands out as the master of ‘process as metaphor’. Memory is key to his work and is demonstrated through the subversion of his materials through mark-making and erasure. The changing landscapes within his films represent the ‘process of both remembering and forgetting the brutal reality and the laws of apartheid’ (Sotiriadi, 1999). In *Felix in Exile* (1994) (Fig. 34), the animated drawings take the protagonist, Felix (who appears as Kentridge), through alternating images of landscape and scenes of political violence with repeated drawing and erasing.



Figure 34 William Kentridge (1994) *Felix in Exile (landscape) [Still]*

Hatoum's choice of materials, and subversion of these is designed to unsettle and challenge the viewer. In *Homebound* (2000) (Fig. 27), the familiar domestic scene is juxtaposed with an implied threat of danger through the unexpected introduction of electricity crackling and lighting up various parts of the installation. The viewer is left to imagine a potential outcome.

Dumas destabilises the painting surface with washes of turpentine before she paints, giving her paintings an unnerving translucence, which are simultaneously enticing, and disturbing for the viewer, such as in *The First People (I-IV)* (1990) (Fig. 23). Her forthright depictions of naked bodies and unsettling larger-than-life portraits are offset by the 'luscious materiality of the paint surface' (Bedford, 2008, p. 43).

Armitage's choice of a non-traditional (subverted) painting surface in the form of lubugo bark cloth is an acknowledgment of his East African heritage and also is, he says, '... an attempt to locate and destabilise the subject of the paintings' (White Cube, 2017). The nature of the material requires Armitage to change his painting technique as his imagery needs to account for the natural flaws, splits and holes in the fabric as seen in *The Fourth Estate* (2017) (Fig. 35). The use of the cloth is only apparent to the viewer on closer inspection and, regardless of the content of the painting, an encounter with the material serves as a reminder of the cultural basis from which the artist works.



Figure 35 Michael Armitage (2017) *The Fourth Estate* - detail [Oil on lubugo bark cloth]

Another tool that could be used to represent displacement is the subversion of image. In my research, I wanted to further understand dehumanisation and how it places and displaces the other. Drawing on Kteily's work on dehumanisation, Resnick (2017) discusses the mental programmes we all have, which provide a capacity for 'othering', the most disturbing of which is the ability to see others as less than human. 'If you think of murder and torture as universally taboo, then dehumanisation of the 'other' is a psychological loophole that can justify them' (Resnick, 2017).

Within the *Migrant* strand, I experimented with the distortion of image to find a visual way to represent dehumanisation which would be challenging for the viewer. Many of the media images featured aid workers in hazmat suits and it was ironic that these protective suits, by obscuring the faces of the helpers, served to dehumanise them while accentuating the human-ness of those being rescued. The application of the subverted black and white images on the *Hazardous Materials* artwork, dehumanises the wearer of the suit and suggests they would permanently carry the memories of events.

Mosse, who was working to similar ends, acknowledges the dehumanising effect of the use of the thermal imaging camera he used to film *Incoming* (2017) (Fig. 33) saying that filming people from a great distance and without their knowledge is, in itself intrusive and that 'the camera carries a certain aesthetic violence, dehumanizing the subject' (Mosse, 2017b). He believes this is mitigated by a 'tenderness' that came with capturing people unawares and that the camera revealed by accident, imagery that is aesthetic and beautiful. 'Human skin is rendered as a mottled patina disclosing an intimate system of blood circulation, sweat, saliva, and body heat' (Mosse, 2017b). The process rehumanises the subject.

Distortion of image can be found in Armitage's work but the delivery of the difficult content is softened by the seductive use of colour. In *Necklacing* (2016) (Fig. 36), Armitage evokes Goya in the grotesque face of a man with a tyre around his neck, who is about to be set alight by a mob in a form of vigilante execution. This piece is in response to a childhood memory for Armitage, who didn't understand what was happening and remembers thinking the fear on the man's face was comical (Alsopp, 2017). By recreating the clown-like features of the man in this painting, Armitage places the viewer as the child witness he was, knowing that, as the narrative is revealed, they will be displaced by the reality of the image. The viewer is complicit before they realise the terms of their engagement with the subject matter.

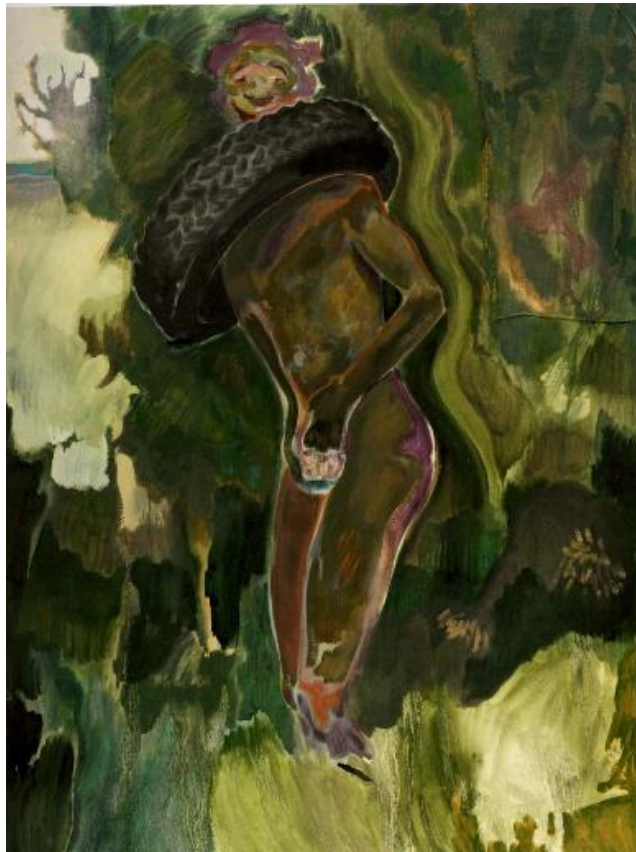


Figure 36 Michael Armitage (2016) *Necklacing* [Oil on lubugo bark cloth]

Scale was the third of the practical elements I identified that could be used to place or displace the viewer. While the use and subversion of process, materials and image had been a ‘hook’ for viewers of my artwork, it was scale that appeared to have the most impact on the physical and emotional response of the viewer. The artwork that generated the greatest audience engagement at my exhibition, was the one with the smallest physical presence i.e. *Displaced*. The tiny figures were able to summon viewers from across the room and hold their attention for some time.

In the larger artworks in my exhibition the viewer was encouraged to approach the artwork to see the detail or the smaller parts that made up the piece. In *Counting the Cost*, the paintings could only be fully appreciated on closer inspection. In *Hazardous Materials*, the viewer needed to step up to the work to make sense of the black and white images.

It is accepted that in a medium such as film, the showing of the work will be through large-scale projection and this makes for an impactful engagement with the viewer. This is the case in Mosse’s film installation *Incoming* and Ai’s *Human Flow*. It is also true of Kentridge’s productions *The Head and the Load* (2018) and *Thick Time* (2016-17) which use film alongside live performance, sculpture and large-scale installation to engulf the spectator. In each of these works, the performance or projection immerses the viewer, in the experience thus making them complicit in events being depicted.

Hatoum’s use of scale in her later works, challenges and confuses the viewer. *Grater Divide* (2002) (Fig. 22) presents as uncanny and menacing but familiar at the same time. In this piece, scale along with context serves to place/displace the viewer.

In summary, the use or subversion of process and materials, image and scale are tools used by me and other artists to stimulate engagement with the viewer, to place them in the context of the artwork, and to challenge them in a way that can be said to physically or psychologically displace them. But the inclusion of these elements in the work is only impactful with the involvement of the viewer.

The place of the viewer

The third theme in this analysis of my own work and in the work of my selected artists, is the place of the viewer in the work. I had always envisaged that the three strands of my research would come together in a single space in the ‘meeting place’ (exhibition) of the three, that Berger talks about.

The role of the viewer, the *You*, was the third and key part of my research triangle. My aim was to produce artworks that represented displacement, but which were also able to place and displace the viewer. This was partly achieved using process, materials, scale and imagery as detailed above. The curation of the show was a further consideration of the place of the spectators of my artwork. They were required to walk around the work; to step up or step away, and to look up and down. They were encouraged to see the images in isolation but also in the context of the other work.

In Hatoum’s early performance art, she places herself at the centre of the artwork exploring contemporary political and social issues, often presenting a direct challenge to the viewer. Hatoum says, ‘The viewer is somehow implicated or even visually or psychologically entrapped in some of the installations’ (Antoni, 1998). For example, in *The Negotiating Table* (1983) (Fig. 26), the viewer must decide how they are placed regarding the narrative.

In her later conceptual work, Hatoum hoped to engage the viewer in a way that was physical, sensual or emotional, to ‘implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation where the experience is more physical and direct’ (Antoni, 1998). She was no longer communicating directly with her body but wanted the spectator to bring their own interpretation to the work (Antoni, 1998).

Dumas shows a similar awareness of the viewer and the power of representation. She acknowledges the viewer is inevitably a stranger who cannot be known and that artists are talking to strangers, but she sees the viewer, nonetheless, as ‘an accomplice in the making of meaning’ in the artwork (Bedford, 2008, p. 34).

Mosse’s engagement with his audience is less subtle. Mosse speaks of his multi-screen film installation *The Enclave* (2013) (Fig. 37) as being kaleidoscopic or sculptural (Mosse, 2014). The viewer is forced to negotiate the space in order to see the film in its entirety and Mosse’s intention is for the disorientation of the viewer to replicate, in some small way, the experience of disorientation of the subject matter, filmed in the jungles and war zones in the Congo.

But Mosse acknowledges that what the spectator takes away with them and what they do with this complicity is something he cannot control (Mosse, 2017a).



Figure 37 Richard Mosse (2013) *The Enclave* [Still]

Aestheticisation of suffering.

Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful, as captions shouldn't moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as a document.

Sontag, 2004, p. 61

Though Sontag is referencing the photograph here, I was very aware from the start of my practice research, of the dilemma of using the pain of others in my artwork (the aestheticisation of suffering) and the risk of the artwork or the medium taking precedence over the content and causing the 'message' to be lost.

When I started work on *Counting the Cost* this aestheticisation of suffering was a concern, especially since I was initially drawn to the beauty of the source imagery (photographic images in the media) and that my engagement with the tragedy was secondary.

My focus quickly became a compulsion to record these events in my own way in order to internalise the stories behind them, demonstrating the intrinsic need that Anderson (2004) speaks of. With the inclusion of the *Me* strand of the research, I was able to start to attempt to tell the stories of others alongside my own experience.

In conversation with Dumas, Kentridge references the work he produced from images of people who had been murdered by the police (*Kentridge & Dumas in Conversation, 2009*). He questions whether it is 'cheap' to take someone else's pain and turn it into art. His justification is his hope 'that somewhere in that actual process of making of the drawing and someone looking at the drawing, is an awareness of the respect that those hours of studying that image and turning it from a photograph into a drawing

entails' and that both the photo and his drawing of it, have a role to play in telling the story – just in different ways (*Kentridge & Dumas in Conversation, 2009*).

Dumas, on the other hand, doesn't draw directly on her South African past. 'The townships were burning' she said of the year she left South Africa, yet she felt unable to address the politics of apartheid in her work (Dumas, 2014). The year was 1976, the same year as events depicted in my *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* painting. In conversation with Kentridge she says, 'sometimes you should leave things alone out of respect – others can do it better than you can' (*Kentridge & Dumas in Conversation, 2009*).

Dumas does, however, tackle difficult subjects including images of death. Bedford (2008, p. 45) suggests that Dumas' work deals with the cycle of life and issues such as sexuality, pleasure and pain, and that while Dumas does consider ethical and moral questions, her focus is on how these are experienced through the body and how she can reflect this through her work.

Armitage does not shy away from depicting images of suffering. As he grapples with the cultural, political and social struggles of his homeland he is tapping into a long tradition of artists such as Goya, in highlighting social and political issues. His work does not offer a superficial moralising critique but rather a delight in the liveliness, beauty and colour of the people, animals and environments in his work (Malbert, 2018, p. 78).

Ai Weiwei is unfazed by criticism that he aestheticises tragedy, and is quoted as saying, 'If I'm not intimidated by the Chinese government, do you think I give a fuck what people in the art world say about me' (Vine, 2018). 'I am a refugee, every bit,' he says. 'Those people are me. That's my identity' (Brooks, 2017).

Mosse acknowledges the dilemma of aestheticising suffering but he believes aesthetics are a powerful communication tool and that aesthetic is the opposite of anaesthetic, so can be said to awaken the senses (Mosse, 2018).

He speaks of beauty as being ‘the sharpest tool in the box’ suggesting that for e.g. by presenting a landscape that has known the horrors of war such as in *The Enclave* (Fig. 37) in a way that is aesthetically appealing, the viewer is put in a ‘problematic place’ (Mosse, 2014).

The aestheticisation of suffering is an ongoing dilemma for me as an artist. As with the artists in my research, my artwork becomes ‘a platform that demands reflection’. I believe the need to communicate drives my practice and that the story I tell will be different.

And, as an artist, I seek to engage with other artists whose work will challenge me. Of all the works I encountered in my practice research, Mosse’s installation *Incoming* (Figs. 19 & 33) is the work that has had the most profound and ongoing impact on me. By putting me, as a viewer and onlooker of events, in this ‘problematic place’, Mosse challenged me to reflect on how I was placed with regards to the subject matter.

It is significant too, that a single tragic image of a migrant boat was the catalyst for the creative and educational journey that my research has been.

8. Conclusion

The Migrants, Me and You was a fine art practice research project with a focus on themes of human migration which explored the states of being placed and displaced as a migrant and how these could be represented through creative practice in a way that engages the viewer. Through my practice I addressed my research questions. What is it to be placed/ displaced as a migrant, as an artist and as a viewer? How can the states of

being placed and being displaced be visually represented and in a way that places and displaces the viewer? Within my creative practice, is it possible to bridge the gap between my own experience of migration and that of migrants caught up in current events? Is it possible to tell someone else's story through art and what consideration should be given to the ethics of aestheticisation of suffering?

I assumed the roles of researcher and the researched, as artist, as migrant and as observer of current events. I worked in a reflexive way and I had no idea where the research would take me but I had thought that the two creative strands, the *Migrant* and the *Me*, might merge at some point and 'assimilate'. What transpired was a little more surprising.

There was a definite evolution of ideas and works within the *Migrant* strand, as described in the *Film of the Exhibition*. The first works, *Counting the Cost* paintings that reflected real-life events, led to my consideration of the aestheticisation of the suffering of others. My reflections on the dehumanisation of people resulted in *Hazardous Materials*, with opportunity for reflection in the emergency blanket and found poem artworks. Though I did not realise it, by the time *My Failed Boats* started to take shape I had stopped telling the stories of others and, with the gathering and re-animation of the paper rubbings in *Displaced*, I was driving the narrative myself. The acceptance of my failure (in my attempts to create little rubber dinghies), appears to be metaphorical acknowledgement that I was not best placed to tell the stories of others.

Meanwhile, in the *Me* strand, I was grappling with the representation of my pre- and post-migrational selves which only resolved when I engaged with Hall's concepts of identity and Prozesky's and Griffiths' writing on the white South African 'condition'. In *Between Worlds, Worlds Between* I used layering and overlaying (much like Kentridge), and this piece and the accompanying *Time Lapse* film, reflect new insights into my

hybridised identity, including the way that my memory and my past has shaped my sense of self.

Seeing the works on display revealed how different the creative journey was in each strand: the two never come together visually but when they came together in the same space, the two parallel strands worked together to highlight my own duality.

The practice research only became meaningful, with the engagement of the *You*, the viewer. The ‘meeting place’ that Berger speaks of, was the exhibition of the works where the three strands of the research came together for the first time, and where the interplay and contradictions between them could be observed.

The way artwork functions is dependent on context, both in the space where it is shown and the context of the spectator e.g. culture, gender, knowledge, personal history etc. (Wesseling, 2017, p.10). When they meet, ‘spectator and artwork become part of a complex historical context that determines how the work is experienced’. Yet it is impossible to know what the viewer brings to an exhibition, how they experience it and what they take away with them. From my own experience, and through this research, I have come to realise that a good exhibition or artwork stays with the viewer long after the event and there is a mental ‘percolation’ over time as the meaning and impact changes making it difficult to define.

These limitations notwithstanding, my observation of visitors at my exhibition provided the responses I had hoped for in the way they navigated the space, and how they engaged with the artwork and with me as artist, migrant, witness to events. This is evidenced in the photographs of the exhibition (Fig. 18).

To answer my research questions of what it is to be placed or displaced, and whether it is possible to tell the story of others, my conclusion is that I do have an insight into what it is to be placed/displaced, as evidenced in my artwork. However, in attempting to tell the stories of others, I concluded my research practice on both the *Migrant* and the *Me* strands were merely explorations of my own narratives from different perspectives.

When considering whether these states can be reflected in my work and in a way that impacts the viewer, I see that they can. Using the tools identified in my research (process, materials, image and scale), I was able to create a space for the coming together of the three strands, a space where change could take place, where artist and viewer alike, would find themselves placed and displaced. And I have shown that the artists in my study have worked in similar ways to place/displace the viewer.

And while I conclude that it had not been possible for me to tell the stories of others within my practice research, and that the stories I ended up telling through my artwork were not the ones I set out to tell, when I reviewed the comments in the visitors book from the exhibition, it became apparent that for some among the *You*, the stories I had been trying to tell had been heard in some form.

The visitor comments are, of course, open to interpretation, but can perhaps give a small insight into an exhibition's impact. I have grouped these comments below to evidence:

Impact: 'Really powerful' (anon); 'thought provoking, detailed and strong' (anon); 'so vivid and so moving' (K); 'reached my heart' (anon); 'evocative and memorable' (Julie); 'the whole exhibition is very inspiring' (Kat)

Subject matter: 'tells a story – a personal story that has a wide reach' (anon), 'testimony to your experience and the experience of others' (Kate); 'what a journey' (Angela), 'you went outwards to be able to go inwards without losing a

sense of the bigger picture' (Ken); 'love how you engage with time of truth through this work' (Gill)

Work and process: 'my favourite piece is the suit and its accidental people by-products (Kat); 'beautifully executed, curation and mixture of media' (Tracy); 'displaced ... seems very good symbolisation of forced mobility' (anon); 'lovely balance between beauty and though provoking subject matter' (Paul)

My practice research has been a fragment of my ongoing life's journey. It had taken no single route, cannot be tracked chronologically or with any sense of hierarchical order. It has been a journey in many parts, and along many paths which converged briefly in the stopping off point that was the exhibition. I have gained new insight into my own identity and sense of self and understanding of how I am placed and displaced through my research.

The journey continues as I continue to reflect on the works undertaken in this practice research, and on the artists I've encountered (including many that I was unable to feature here) and I explore further what it means to be a migrant, an artist and a witness to current world events.



Figure 38 Visitor Comment, in sight Exhibition (2018)

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